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Scottish Socialist Party

Marxism and the SSP

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

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An important debate has started about the role of the ISM platform in the SSP, and whether a new and more open platform needs to be formed. In this article Nick McKerrell gives a personal view of the progress of the SSP and draws a balance sheet of the experience of the ISM platform and where it should go from here.

The ISM left the Committee for a Workers International [1] four years ago in January 2001. We formed a large majority of the organization in Scotland and left in frustration at a stifling leadership, which constantly sniped at the achievements of the SSP.

The leaders of the CWI were rejected because essentially they had the belief that “there was only one international which holds all the answers to the problems facing the workers movement”. Such a belief was rejected by the ISM as outmoded, sectarian and completely out of tune with the problems facing Marxists today.

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The 2001 split marked a 10-year period where the leadership of what was the Militant tradition had engaged in a number of theoretical and practical battles to advance the cause of socialism in Scotland. One of the most lasting achievements of this was the Scottish Socialist Party.

The four years of existence of the ISM has seen the biggest growth of a Scottish independent left wing organisation since the polarised period of the 1930s when Stalinism and Fascism strode the globe. The election of a sizeable parliamentary group of 6 MSP's in 2003 and the spreading of active branches fighting for grass roots socialism is a remarkable achievement.

However November 2004 saw the biggest crisis of the SSP's six-year life. The resignation of Tommy Sheridan as convener and the subsequent blitzkrieg from the media against the party rocked a lot of people.

It led to a contest for convener between two members of the ISM - Alan McCombes and Colin Fox, the victor. The 2005 conference understandably had a genuine mood of unity about it, but what lasting lessons can be learned by Marxists - in particular by the political tradition of the ISM whose strategy was essential in the genesis of the SSP?

Sharp Turns

It seems now like almost another age, but the roots of the ISM lie in a debate held in the early nineties over a break with the Labour Party. The so-called “Scottish Turn” was proposed to launch an open organisation in Scotland in opposition to Labour and the SNP.

This was a sharp change to Militant's previous approach, which was to organise within the Labour Party. The scale of this change was too much for some sections of the Militant organisation and it led to a small splinter group led by Ted Grant - one of the theoretical founders of the Militant Trotskyist tradition - breaking away.

In truth however such a turn was long overdue particularly in Scotland. The anti-poll tax struggle between 1988-91 had taken on gargantuan dimensions in some respects - it involved organising communities, providing advice and

confronting the state in all its formations. In Scotland (and indeed the rest of Britain) this was clearly given direction by Militant members in particular Tommy Sheridan.

But Militant was put in the fairly bizarre position of not being able to completely exploit the political fall-out of the poll tax battle. Not being an open organisation recruitment had to be done secretly. Moreover people had to be encouraged to join the Labour Party, which in Scotland was quite clearly the establishment that the poll tax struggle was against!

This political vacuum was filled by the SNP who made remarkable political growth in this period symbolised by Jim Sillars' victory in the 1988 Govan by-election. At various points in this time ridiculous claims were even put forward by sections of the SNP that they were "leading" the anti-poll tax movement.

So launching an open organisation in November 1991 left Scottish Militant Labour with some ground to catch up. Even then a section of Militant thought this was a temporary move with the long term seeing a return to the Labour Party, which would turn decisively to the left!

Even the name SML reflected that as Tommy put it in his account of the poll tax struggle and this period "Labour is in there because it's the movement with which working-class people have traditionally identified."

This was reflective of the political feeling at that time.

But the move was not simply about leaving the Labour Party it was about launching a new model of socialist organisation - engaging openly with working class communities on a variety of campaigns and raising concepts of Marxism.

This was an ambitious project and because of geographical and organisational limitations could not be spread across the whole of the country. But where it happened it was a big success including some quite spectacular electoral results - even though the electoral battleground was not initially viewed as the strongest field for SML.

From his prison cell in the 1992 election Tommy Sheridan received 6287 votes in Pollok - one of the largest ever votes for an independent socialist in a British General Election. SML won a series of council elections in Glasgow, including two within Pollok with Tommy himself winning a seat. Dundee also saw a series of strong electoral results.

These results were very significant at the time - Jack McConnell at that time was appointed General Secretary of the Scottish Labour Party in part because he wanted to strategically respond to SML's growth particularly in the West of Scotland.

In retrospect the very strong localised electoral base was taking place in a period of major defeat and disorientation for the Scottish working class. The victories of SML in 1992-3 were a cry of despair at the prospect of another five years of Conservative rule and the impotence of the Scottish Labour establishment.

As the prospect of finally kicking out the Tories grew in the nineties so the electoral gains of SML were reversed but the method of the open turn was not. Raising a positive socialist message and vision coupled with campaigning on localised issues was carried on throughout the nineties.

This was done in the context of a triumphalist capitalist world following the collapse of Stalinism and the disorientation of most of the organised left. This method of the Scottish Turn was like a lifeboat in the turbulent storm of the last years of Tory rule which were probably in recent times the most difficult period to be an organised socialist.

Re-aligning the Left

Engaging in the dynamic of struggle most clearly in the poll tax but on numerous other campaigns for example against the threat of water privatisation and in defence of civil liberties created the momentum to develop and create the Scottish Socialist Alliance in 1995.

An ounce of experience is worth a ton of theory and it was through struggle and campaigning that the SSA came into being rather than a purely theoretical desire to build left unity. The international re alignment of the left in the wake of the collapse of Stalinism also helped this.

By engaging with other organised groups and non-aligned individuals who were comfortable with the label "socialist" SML also developed as an organisation. It was less willing to claim it had all the answers - to be the one and only socialist group.

Further because the dynamics of struggle were engaged with, the leadership was tested and held accountable. There was also healthy scepticism at absolutist claims of political certainty - a more open method was utilised.

In some ways this was a re-engagement with a critical Marxist method of challenging ideas with new concepts and eventually emerging with a new stronger approach: the dialectic.

In other ways it was a big break from Militant's traditional approach which it shared with other sizeable Trotskyist organisations of maintaining theoretical purity on central key issues: whether on the nature of the Stalinist States of Russia and Eastern Europe or relation with the Labour Party.

In the period after the Second World War where capitalism and Stalinism seemed to be very stable social structures - of course they weren't - capable of providing reform such a purist approach was arguably necessary. Indeed by using it Militant had amazing success of engaging with working class struggle particularly in Britain.

Other Trotskyist groups maintained their own purism during this period. Significantly each had its own theoretical leader Grant and later Taaffe in Militant, Cliff in the International Socialists (later the SWP), Healy in the Workers' Revolutionary Party and Mandel in the International Marxist Group.

It seemed that Militant were realising the limitation of this approach in the aftermath of the 1989-91 collapse of Stalinism- first with the Scottish Turn (later adopted in England) then with the willingness to engage with other forces and launch Socialist Alliances.

In the mid-nineties the Militant feted SML internationally over their ability to lead successful campaigns and promote the ideas of Marxism and their launch of the SSA. A similar experiment was attempted with the Swedish organisation of Militant. However the leadership of the CWI - the Militant's International was to decisively reject this method. They seemed to resurrect the "one true voice" approach, which permeates most pronouncements of the CWI today.

Launch of the SSP

This became crystal clear with the furor over the decision to raise the concept of launching the Scottish Socialist Party in 1998 and throwing the full resources of SML into building it. This was totally opposed by the leadership of the CWI.

Their world congress passed a resolution in 1998, which explicitly stated “this congress of the CWI places on record its strongest possible opposition to the decision of SML to launch the Scottish Socialist Party”.

In retrospect everyone has 20-20 vision it is said, but it is worthy of note that there was nothing inevitable about the success and growth of the SSP in the twenty first century.

In the difficult aftermath of New Labour's landslide victory the SSA was struggling to maintain a profile. Two of the major forces of the British Left - the Militant (then renamed Socialist Party) and the SWP were scathing of the concepts behind the launch of the new Scottish Socialist Party. Even sections of the bourgeois press mocked yet “another” left wing organisation -noting that in the course of seven years Tommy , as councillor, had been in three different groups.

But it was the method of SML - by implication that method of the Scottish turn - tempered by the living experience of the Alliance and campaigning that created and built the SSP to the point of its success.

As a Marxist pro-SSP platform the ISM had a theoretical role in developing this approach. This was well expressed in the document in opposition to the CWI faction who later formed their own platform: “The role of ISM is to develop a cadre and to promote political ideas and discussion inside the party on the philosophical, economic and political analysis which we stand on”.

What now for ISM?

Four years on after the ISM left the CWI has this been done? Well in one sense given the extreme success of the party in that time, yes. However aspects of this role have been patchy.

Given the relationship of members of the ISM with the broader party at a local and national level - in many cases playing leading roles - and being utterly committed to the SSP this has led to a weakening in some cases disappearance of ISM structures.

Paradoxically in terms of recruitment the ISM does not want to be a mass organisation at this stage. If hundreds of SSP members swelled the ranks of the ISM or indeed any platform (which most members of the SSP are not in) it would be in response to crisis. Either an internal crisis of the party where perhaps it was threatened by being taken over by a reformist current or external crisis where a revolutionary situation or even mass unrest was common and many would have a thirst for explicitly Marxist ideas.

The external crisis scenario is not likely in the short term - although the possibility of the national question in Scotland erupting in such a way in a relative short time scale could not be completely ruled out. But if an internal crisis broke out (again not likely) it would also be a crisis for the ISM as it is so inextricably tied to the SSP.

As well as having this recruitment limitation the ISM has not sought to impose political lines on its platform members. This is refreshing and open and arguably one of the reasons that the ISM faces no opprobrium over its existence from the broader party membership.

It has meant however that on issues like the 50-50 debate for gender equality voted on in the 2002 conference or the constitutional changes that saw a directly elected national executive there was no promotion of a political leadership on these questions at least not by the entire ISM.

In the aftermath of Tommy's resignation there was a chance for the entire SSP to debate the nature of political

leadership in socialist organisations by questioning whether the party needs a convener or some other structure.

However the chance to do this was stopped at a vote of the National Council in December 2004. Challenging ideas critically is central to the concept of Marxism so at first glance it seems strange that members of the ISM voted against having this debate though they did. Indeed challenging concepts of central leadership were central to the successful development of Marxism in Scotland.

But once again the ISM did not present political direction or if it did it was in two separate directions.

To that extent then the ISM has failed in developing a large "cadre" that is a grass roots leadership in every branch of the SSP able to provide political direction in good times and bad.

There are external factors that have caused this as well. Although gaining 6 MSP's [2] was a massive advance - as were the resources that came with it in itself it did not mark an increase in the class struggle.

The massive anti-war movement - the largest demonstration in Glasgow in living memory was held ten weeks prior to the 2003 election that saw the break through - was and is significant. In general though class struggle still remains at relatively low levels.

This has a knock-on effect at all levels of the party. At times it is difficult to have a unified campaign across the whole of Scotland that gains the same echo in every area and across the entire membership.

The vital work that the SSP Parliamentary Group do in promoting concrete reforms while raising a vision of a socialist society can sometimes seem isolated when struggle is at a lower tempo in the rest of society. It is significant that the recent all-out nursery nurses strike was a high point for the party at grass roots level and within the Parliament where their cause was shouted from the rooftops by the MSP's. Several local leaders of this struggle joined the SSP as a result.

The ISM also suffers because of this context - it is difficult to create a "cadre" purely theoretically - engaging in struggle is the best university for political leadership.

Marxism matters!

However the need to develop Marxist thought and a political leadership using the critical egalitarian method employed in various ways in the last fifteen years in Scotland is still critical.

Marx developed the theory of historical materialism that established a society is determined by its economic foundations. As these economic factors developed so did societies - systems that seemed socially secure for hundreds or even thousands of years were overthrown as they proved a limitation on the development of society.

The dynamic of that change was class struggle: "it was seen that all past history ... was the history of class struggle."

Capitalism utterly dominates the planet at the present time. It gives the appearance of being the usual form of society - the only game in town. But it is a redundant social system. In many ways this is even clearer than it was in Marx's era - the 19th century. Mass poverty, famine, warfare and environmental destruction are viewed as the norm rather than horrendous inhuman situations.

Fighting for a socialist society in that sense has the force of history behind it but of course it is not that simple. A pure ideological worldview is not enough. In fact simply having a worldview with no means to engage in struggle is worse than useless. What is required is the building of these ideas and people to argue for them and lead the Scottish Socialist Party at all levels.

Modern methods of education should be utilised to develop these concepts - other ideas on feminism and environmentalism and others can inform this. It may be that the ISM is no longer the most appropriate vehicle for this to develop.

The ISM is not the same organisation it was four years ago nor is the SSP. All things develop - you can never stand in the same river twice. One of the flaws of the CWI and indeed the SWP's initial assessment of the Scottish Socialist Party was an attempt to impose strict formal categories on what type of party it was.

The SSP has developed largely in a positive left wing way - its programme and manifestos still stand apart from every other left formation in Europe. It combines a proactive vision of a new society with sets of realistic demands. It also engages positively with the national question in Scotland linking the struggle for independence with socialism.

It is the role of Marxists to ensure that the same trajectory continues within our party. But that it is not left to a handful of leaders to do this we need a broader layer of the membership to feel this is their responsibility in the party too.

A new forum is required where all Marxists feel comfortable. However it simply cannot be a discussion circle within the SSP it needs to help develop a local grassroots leadership for the party. In this there will be a direct engagement of political theory and practical campaigning.

In contemplating a new organisational form while maintaining the same method of work the traditions are being carried on that began during the poll tax and were maintained during the nineties and the last years of the SSP by Scottish Militant Labour and the ISM.

This article first appeared in the ISM journal [Frontline](#).

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/nick.jpg>]

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[1] The international organisation associated with Peter Taaffe's Socialist Party in Britain.

[2] Members of the Scottish Parliament